

MICRONESIA: STEPS IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION

BY AYDIN NAZMI

As I watch the hazy orange sun sink into the still blue sea overlooking Chuuk lagoon, I marked the end of another seemingly ordinary day in the Federated States of Micronesia. But this October day was special—it marked the beginning of a promising new era in Chuuk's fight against HIV and AIDS. For the past few months, several proceedings had set into motion a cascade of events that would ultimately (hopefully) benefit and educate the people of Chuuk state.

With a population of well over 50,000—about half living on the seven square mile capital island of Weno, Chuuk represents over half of all the Federated State of Micronesia population. Being by far the most densely populated state in the country, Chuuk has inevitably as many problems associated with many health care issues. For example, high rates of infant mortality (3%)¹, teen pregnancy (16%)², and STDs rank Chuuk among the highest in ill-health indicators in the Pacific. Moreover, these issues will continue to plague Chuuk until measures are taken to educate the future generations in the methods of prevention. Unfortunately, the public school system in Chuuk has negligible amounts of information related to reproductive health and sexuality. To further exacerbate the situation, cultural mores dictate that sexual and reproductive health are rarely discussed—even with one's own family. In fact, young people are so ill at ease to broach

subjects related to sex, even with health workers, that it is almost impossible to convey a message of sexual health—much less go to the Office of Public Health (OPH) to ask about related topics or pick up condoms (for fear of being seen doing such things).

This year, the OPH with financial support from the Secretariat of the Pacific Community's AIDS Project began a quarterly newsletter called CHAT (Chuuk HIV/AIDS Topics) in hopes of spreading the word about AIDS. Aspiring to reach the largest possible audience, CHAT was printed in both English and Chuukese and provided fundamental information about HIV and AIDS. This newsletter was produced with help in the form of articles from several community leaders. For example, the first issue contained articles written by the Bishop, public health nurses, and educators. Despite the fact that the information contained within the newsletter had never been

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taken to the Chuukese public, CHAT became surprisingly popular. In fact, the output of future newsletters was increased to meet the ever-increasing demand from the public. The third edition, which came out in September, contained a message from the governor of Chuuk state, Ansito Walter. This proved that CHAT was a success and that it had the support of the leaders of the state—more importantly, people were receptive to the message. The fourth edition of CHAT will be extended from 12 to 16 pages to make room for the special features planned by the editor. CHAT was one step in the right direction: it was simple, cheap, contained the appropriate message, and was popular.

The OPH has three major events planned for

reach the farthest outer islands in the state. The leaders of the Task Force and AIDS coordinators are striving to make the dream of Chuuk becoming a leader in AIDS awareness a reality. Three steps in the same direction.

As if all this were not enough, Chuuk was recently privileged to host two SPC-sponsored seminars on reproductive health and advocacy with Dr. Ezekiel Nukuro of the SPC/UNFPA project based in Suva. In October, Dr. Nukuro conducted two workshops entitled IEC (Information, Education, and Communication) and Advocacy for Reproductive Health. The opening ceremony included words from the Director of Health Services and Lt. Governor Manuel Sound who requested, "Do not be afraid or ashamed to talk about reproductive

health issues...if we are going to control these problems, we must talk about them." Indeed, we must speak out—especially here in the Pacific where discussing sensitive issues is not always the norm, we must educate our future



generations and ourselves. The workshop had representatives from many areas including youth groups, women's groups, health workers, and church leaders. As the president of a youth group, Dino Dawe, a teacher from Chuuk High School planned to conduct a workshop for the young people in his village regarding the topics that were presented at the workshop. Dr. Siana Kurabui from Chuuk State Hospital was hopeful, "I think that the information that we learn from this workshop will motivate us [the health workers] to work harder to control the problems associated with poor family planning." And Swanihda Robonei, Family Health Project Coordinator at FSM Department of Health

the upcoming months for AIDS awareness and reproductive health. First, the office is planning an extension clinic at the College of Micronesia (COM). This clinic is designed for the special needs of college-age youth. The extension clinic promises to be a safe and private place for young people to go with questions and issues regarding reproductive health. This clinic is planned to include the essentials of any youth clinic such as condoms, peer counseling, STD screening, and HIV/AIDS information. Second, the OPH plans to have a World AIDS Day 2000 event that will publicize information about AIDS on the radio, in live presentations, and on cable television. Third, the OPH, in conjunction with the Chuuk State AIDS Task Force has recently been putting in overtime planning the best strategy for attacking the AIDS issue. The Task Force, along with support from the staff at the OPH has put together a proposal that would allow Chuuk's AIDS awareness campaign to



AIDS Educators Aydin Nazmi and Stephen Strojny with COM Chuuk Students.



Aydin Nazmi presenting a plan for HIV/AIDS awareness in Chuuk at the IEC workshop.

who was also a part of the seminars remarked, "Chuuk is infamous for having very high levels of many of the ill health indicators for the FSM and Pacific. We hope that this workshop will teach participants the fundamentals and benefits of advocacy and how to take their message out into the public

efficiently. In doing so, we hope that Chuuk will regain some control of its reproductive health problems." Indeed, all the participants seemed optimistic by the end of the workshop. This was yet another step in the right direction for Chuuk.

More positive events are in the works for AIDS awareness in Chuuk: the editors of CHAT are planning popular radio drama programs aimed at AIDS education, COM is sponsoring two Peace Corps Volunteers to conduct 'AIDS Day' in classrooms, and the youth at COM are becoming more and more involved in AIDS awareness and plan to educate peer counselors is also in progress. Furthermore, the AIDS awareness team plans to operate a booth at the second annual Chuuk Youth Rally early in 2001.

The overwhelming majority of people with HIV—some 95% of the global total—live in the developing world. That proportion is set to grow even further as infection rates continue to rise in countries where poverty, poor health systems, and limited resources for prevention and care fuel the spread of the virus.³ This indicates that we in the Pacific are at high risk for increasing numbers of HIV and AIDS cases. Thus, we as members of the

Pacific community, regardless of capacity, must take action and join the fight against AIDS. When we look at other Pacific nations such as Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands, we see positive trends that have been set in the past five years in educating people—especially youth—about the hazards of AIDS in an entertaining, and therefore well-liked and received manner. Groups from these areas actively produce very popular dramas and television programs dedicated to HIV/AIDS education for young people. And young people are the most important target audience for two reasons.



COM students promoting condom use on World AIDS Day.

First, they are in the majority—there are more youth than non-youth in the Pacific, and second, they represent the subset of the population that are contracting HIV at the highest rate. At the rate Chuuk is going, it will be no surprise when the FSM joins the growing number of Pacific Island nations that are truly informed about HIV/AIDS. Steps in the right direction have been taken in the past year that have been monumental in the development of Chuuk's AIDS awareness campaign and I, for one, have been impressed. ●

¹ Chuuk State Office of Public Health statistics; reflects numbers from hospital deliveries only

² Chuuk State Office of Public Health statistics; reflects numbers from hospital deliveries only

³ WHO statistical data

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